

Images of Darkness in Robert Frost's Poetry

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Abstract: *Robert Frost, the great American poet images a life that is dominated by isolation, death, and loss. The realistic vision of human life has been delineated by his frequent application of gruesome images. Frost's poems mimic loneliness, conflicts, contradictions, and disillusionment of human life with the help of the dark images. Images such as 'Frozen Lake', 'Witches', 'Night', 'War', 'Dark', 'Death' are ardently visible in Frost's poems that provide an emblematic perception of human life. The darker images of Frost are also prevalent through the titles of the poems like "Acquainted with Night"; "The Death of the Hired Man"; "Desert Places". The very titles stimulate the images of the feelings of disillusionment and a general sense of isolation. This article attempts to analyze the significance of those dark images in order to uncover an intimate insight of the modern world.*

Keywords/Phrases: *Images of Darkness; Conflicts and Contradictions; Synecdoche; Vision of Modern Life*

Robert Frost (1874 - 1963), the New England voice, is a modern poet not because he wrote poetry in the modern period but because of his accepting things as they are of his time. His poems first depict the horrid picture of modern life and then try to make a way out from it. Randall Jarrell has said that 'Modern poetry may be said to have begun as a fresh attempt to solve the problem posed by science'. (Cox 180) It is an undeniable fact that during Frost's time Science and Industrialism made human life emotionless, purposeless and helpless to a great extent. Hence the perspicacious Frost sensed a design of darkness all over the universe, even in the deep of human heart. The evil design of darkness has confined human life in a series of difficulties and confusions. A close examination of some of the images of Frost will denude a terrible horror of modernity, such as 'Frozen Lake'; 'Witches'; 'Saddest City'; 'Lonely House'; 'Darkest Evening'; 'Night'; 'Grave'; and 'Winter'. The images also provide us a plight of individual life and emotional sterility. T. S. Eliot in his poem "The Wasteland" has broadened an identical view in a modern allusive metaphysical manner, where the present world has been portrayed as a barren and sterile place. The dark images not only show us the dismal aspect of human life but also make us aware of the danger we are going to experience and thus they constantly make us vigilant on our way to life.

Robert Frost has amplified a philosophy of life through all of his poems; all the poems together draw a complete picture of realistic modern life. Brower has mentioned, 'A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written,' and 'The object of the chapter that follows is 'circulation' in Frost's sense, 'getting among the poems' in order

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to read each one with success and with finer awareness of its position in the Frostian and the larger universes of poetry.' (Brower VII)

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep

("Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" Lines 13-14)

(The Norton Anthology of Poetry 1131)

A question normally springs up, whose woods? At this point if one is acquainted with the first line of this poem, the question may not arise.

Whose woods these are I think I know.

("Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" Line 1)

(The Norton Anthology of Poetry 1131)

Now, we can attempt to answer why the woods are dark and deep? To answer this question, we are to perceive the unmixed knowledge of the whole writings of Mr. Frost. Reuben A. Brower has confessed in the preface of *Poetry of Robert Frost* that, 'I have also taken the risk of introducing comparisons of Frost's poetry with passage of prose by Emerson, Thoreau, and William James'. So now, 'dark and deep' may be synonymous to the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. An instantaneous reply can be given to interpret the phrase 'dark and deep' used by the poet, i.e. it may refer to the evil atmosphere of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Frost has presented his dark images time and again in a symbolic and synecdoche method to record the cheerlessness, deserted and lonesome life. We once again mark the images like 'alienation', 'old savage', 'crumbling wall', 'settling moon' which are good enough to describe the horror of modernity in a symbolic manner. Frost has said:

Imagery and after-imagery are about all

There is to poetry. Synecdoche and

Synecdoche. – My motto is that something

Must be left to god

Frost, Robert. Quoted by J. Mc Bride Dabbs.

"Robert Frost and the Dark Woods".

Yale Review 23.3 (1934): 514-515 (Mohanta 49)

Frost is called a pastoral poet; a poet who illustrates the benevolent side of country life. This is true in a sense that he has expressed the poetry of the landscape of New England in his poetry but there is unusually a dark or troubled spirit at work in his poems. Unlike Wordsworth he never searches the presence of something supernatural in nature.

The natural images like 'Frozen Lake', 'Darkest Evening', 'Downy Flake', in the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" represent the sterility and frozenness of modern life. The indecisiveness of the modern man is vividly captured by particular word choice. For instance, woods are often identified with the unknown destination, death and mysterious mind. The phrases such as 'darkest evening' and 'frozen lake' are

purposefully used to solidify the mood of stillness. The speaker rides into the darkness on an unknown journey, only to find himself caught between woods and frozen lake. After contemplating on the decision he must make the speaker decides to the life that he has always known. The speaker is afraid to venture out the unknown. In general, people live in fear of change. People are afraid to take a chance even after getting some guarantee. Beneath the apparent simplicity of Frost's writings, there lurks the hidden commentary on both nature of humanity in an extremely subtle way and heightens the effect that modern life is awfully isolated and the way of life is horribly dark.

Robert Frost in his poem "Mending Wall" muses upon the differences between people and relationships. The magical words of the narrator, skillfully depicts the inanimate objects as a part of evil. By exploring the images applied in "Mending Wall", we can draw a line that the 'wall' is set as a barrier in human communication. The wall that is supposed to act as a 'protection' only causes harm to the two neighbors. The frivolity of the situation is echoed by referring to the whole process as just another kind of outdoor game. "Frost was temperamentally a poet of meditative sobriety. The truth he sought was inmate in heart of humanity and in common objects" (Perkins 847). By adopting the image of the wall, Robert Frost indicates something suggestive and something more than the surface meaning of a stone wall. Frost may imply an invisible wall that stands in the way of people's genuine reciprocity by presenting a conflict over the wall. Instead of mending the wall, people are supposed to outstrip their conventional restraints and tear down the wall in between. The wall has incarcerated human life in numerous ways. We are confined within ourselves; we are captured by the national boundary. Furthermore, we are restricted by the products of science and finally human life is bounded by the wall of death. On the other hand, the industrialized countries have broadened the appalling condition of life and established a reign of death. Frost records this despair of human life in several of his poems.

The hired man, Silas meets his death in the poem, "The Death of the Hired Man". The sudden death of the man frightens the readers. What causes him to embrace death? Is it simply because that the man becomes old? Probably the reason is not so simple. The hired man dies because the industrialist society does not permit any man to survive who fails to provide physical effort. Simultaneously, the hired man possesses self respect so he cannot beg his living from others. In this circumstance, the hired man had nothing to do except embracing death; the death that displays the sorrowful portrait of modern life. The image 'small sailing cloud' suggests the agent of death that "hit the moon" can better be considered as an example of the "obscure"(dark) image'(Mohanta 85). We get the concrete evidence of the above statement in the last two lines of the poem.

Warren? She questioned

Dead was all he answered.

("The Death of the Hired Man" Lines 174-175)

(The Norton Anthology of Poetry 1126)

It may be relevant to say that like William Shakespeare, Robert Frost also holds the universal opinion about the insignificance and fragility of human life. In the poem 'Out, Out...' the poet demonstrates it in the most extreme manner by employing the realistic

images to depict how people advance forward with their lives after the death of a loved one; how selfishly they (the human race) show concern only for themselves. The poet pictures a scene which he once witnessed of a family cutting wood on a buzz-saw in their yard. The setting is Vermont and the time is late afternoon. Frost employs imagery to reveal the setting, the boy's 'yard' in Vermont right before 'sunset'. Once again the images vividly detail the 'five mountain ranges' within the eyesight of the yard. The poet foreshadows the tragic event to come when he wishes that the workers would have 'called it a day' and 'given' the boy 'the half hour that(he) counts so much when saved from work', the adult responsibility of cutting wood with a buzz saw. The sun is setting and the boy's sister calls him to come and eat supper. As the boy hears it dinner time he gets excited and cuts his hand by mistake. By the doctor arrives it is too late and the hand is already lost. The boy falls asleep never to wake up again. The last sentence of the poem, 'since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs' affirms that the farm family engrossed in their hard work are unable to realize the brutal claws of the rapid growth of Industrialism, and there is nothing they can do for him. They turn back to their 'affairs' for they must do it in order to survive the family. The very act signifies that the family has to keep working to get by life, and cannot spend too much time mourning the loss of their son.

The boy had to suffer a cruel death; 'Little-less-nothing!-and that ended it'. Thus the poem portrays an image of death; its theme is unpredictability of modern human life in an industrialist society.

A poem of dark vision, "Desert Places" gives ample evidence of Frost's strength to achieve aesthetic detachment from certain sorts of destructive experience. The poem supplies its readers with a situation that invigorates the images of isolation, barrenness, and feelings of abandonment. The word 'desert' is often associated with harsh living conditions and a lifeless place.

Having experienced the deadness, the spiritless of the outer world, the poet marks that he too, is 'absent spirited'; he too, is included in the loneliness in the world of separateness. Finding oneself in such a paradoxical universe, one arrives at a perception by recognizing the plurality of material existence and discovers one's place in the universal array of physical facts- that is, in nature. This sense of realization is akin to the discovery of Emerson, 'too late to be helped, that we exist.' For Emerson, however, we exist in positive relation to higher values; the essence of our meaning consists not in separateness but in unity. For Frost, the person exists negatively. Thus the negativity is figured as death, the ultimate weight of which in cosmic fashion smothers all life, leaving the poet alone in a dead universe. "Desert Places" demonstrates clearly the power of the imagination to influence the poet's observation of the region he witnesses. 'I have it in me', he says of the fear that arises from his bone-and spirit- chilling meditation. As a result of his voyage toward the 'blanker whiteness' of imagination, he can barely continue that other journey across the countryside, at least not in the spirit with which he began. What terrifies him so much, however, is not the fact that he is alone, without other people, but that alone with himself he may find nothing—no one and nothing within. Whereas 'Stopping by Woods' presents an invitation to the solitude and inertia of snow, the poem "Desert Places" presents the attendant fear that once giving in to the self, or

going into the self, he will find that the journey has been for nothing, that there is nothing but loneliness, blankness, and absent-spiritedness in the sense of absence of spirit. Man's emotional fear of death and barrenness of life is the centre of "Desert Places". The old man is frightened by the dark and quiet atmosphere around him. He does not know how to pass the horrendous time alone. Gradually, the old man comes to realize that the barrenness is not in the surroundings but in his own mind.

The ensnaring and threatening sketch of modernized life has been visualized in the fears of the wife of "The Hill Wife". Her fears have been so convincingly stated that the tone subverts any rational, fearless response on the reader's part. The very story of the hill wife implies an image of 'sexually empty marriage', 'frightening childless house' and 'vacant-seeming place'.

The images like 'lonely house', 'lamps unlighted', 'fire gone gray', 'ineffectual hands', 'furrowed field', 'grave'; instantly transform us to an isolated world where life becomes a curse. Moreover they have captivated the minds of thousands of readers as they witness such a situation that inflicts loneliness on humanity. The lonesome hill wife exhibits the phlegmatic human life which makes us aware of the pangs of being lonely. Modern life is full of action, it is true, but there is little spiritual association with it. The companionless modern life creates a kind of pressure on a human being and compels to remain aloof not only from his surroundings but also from the spiritual beliefs. The unfriendly situation instigates him to find a solution in the grave.

Conflict and contradiction is an inseparable part of modern life and dilemma of choice is always there. Conflict and contradiction is the out come of dualism; there is fire and there is ice, one cannot deny the existence of fire and one will also admit the existence of ice. The philosophy of human life includes dualism which provokes conflict and contradiction. Distrust is the by-product of dualism that creates a turbulence that rocks human belief. This darker suspicion hampers the natural rhythm of life. Robert Frost records the dualism of life in his poem 'Fire and Ice'; the title itself indicates conflict and contradiction.

Some say the world will end in Fire,
Some say in ice.

("Fire and Ice" Lines 1-2)

(The Norton Anthology of American Literature 1890)

These two lines simply plunge someone into the sea of duality. "Opposites meet in Frost's vision as in Uriel's, not however in a unity in which veil is transformed into good, but in a 'melancholy dualism' that sees potential darkness in both love and hate." (Brower 118-119) What then is to be decided? The decision will come after suffering a series of confusion and sometimes it never comes. The poet is making us acquainted with the contradictions to minutely show us the problems of life so that we can understand them well and handle them as necessary. The poet is not simply telling that life is full of problems but he is making us conscious regarding those problems. Human life is mysterious and the more closely we know the mystery the more we can make it desirable.

In "An Old Man's Winter Night" Frost depicts the agonized state of an old man who is waiting in an empty house. The old man is lonely and the house is dark. The poet has created somber atmosphere with the help of the images that makes the house more dangerous than the grave. It seems that the old man is waiting for the final destiny all alone in an empty dark house. He cannot wait any more; he cannot believe the life in the darkness; there is a silent cry for death in the winter night.

Life at times becomes unbearable for us because of physical and mental obstacle. All our desires are centralized at one point that is death, though we know that it is the most terrifying part of life still we long for it.

We experience pleasure in reading a poem like "Design" not because Frost is an expert Entomologist like Fabre, but because he is an extremely competent poet, who moves us by the use of language, image, and cadence. The word "Design" literally means to create or draw up, to plan toward a specific purpose. The idea of design in the poem suggests that some other entity or force has specifically created the white heal-all, the white spider, and the white moth and brought them together for a particular purpose. 'This is a poem of finding evil in innocence, a song of experience, though the voice is hardly that of Blake's child-like singer.' (Brower 105) Our surroundings makes up our world and it is not free at all from evil, even the small or innocent objects of our surroundings may be confined by the force of evil. Frost is not simply pessimistic in this poem though he has found the evil even in the smallest object; he is making an attempt to make us conscious about the force of evil so that we may handle it skillfully. Randall Jarrell correctly points out, 'We have so indissolubly identified ourselves with the moth and flower and spider that we cannot treat our own nature and importance, which theirs symbolize, as fundamentally different from theirs.' (Cox 90) Robert Frost investigates the dichotomies of 'light' and 'dark', 'good' and 'bad', and 'life' and 'death' through his poem "Design". He asks whether these concepts and the characters affected by them are united through design or coincidences which thus create the central tension of the poem. While almost every word and image work to produce this tension, Frost ultimately offers no resolution of the tension.

What but design of darkness to appall?

If design govern in a thing so small.

("Design" Lines 13-14)

(The Norton Anthology of Poetry 1131)

The poet builds this poem not to offer the present readers an easy answer about life. Instead he sets up an ambivalent argument about life and invites his readers to explore, if they can.

We have seen that Robert Frost's special way of depicting nature is a means of dealing with the problem which science and technology posed for the modern poet. It therefore appears that his pastoralism provides a means of dealing with a similar problem. It is that of the preserving within the disorganized world created by science the sense of order and unity a meaningful life requires. In his poems, Frost's dominant motive is to reassert the value of individual perception against the fragmenting of experience resulting from

modern technology. They thus deal with one of the most fundamental concerns of twentieth-century thought. It is true that Robert Frost's withdrawal from the modern city to an agrarian world belongs to the past. He has found a retreat in one of those out-of-the-way places where technology has not yet complicated life by separating man from the land. Regional New England is for him a medium for examining the complex world of today, a standard by which to evaluate it, and a context within which to discover the order underlying experience that modern world life has obscured and confused. The speech of Lionel Trilling in honour of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday asserts that there is a dominant quality of terror in the works of the poet and the poet himself is a 'terrifying poet', and even the universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. One of the great virtues of Trilling's speech is that in it he has made clear the essential way in which Frost's poetry reflects modern life. The poet does not depict the outward events and conditions through his images, but the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss are bleakly apparent. Treacherous forces of nature are forever breaking through the pleasant surface of the landscape in this manner. These panoramas opening upon fearful realities do not in the least negate the beauty that Robert Frost also sees in the nature; rather, it is they which give his songbirds, wildflowers, brooks and tress their poignant appeal.

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